GARDEN notes

SUMMER 2025

NORTHWEST HORTICULTURAL SOCIETY

Hydrangea macrophylla 'Horwack' PISTACHIO™
Image by Richie Steffen

THE GRASS MAY NOT BE GREEN, BUT YOUR HYDRANGEAS CAN BE!

Hydrangea macrophylla PISTACHIO™

Text and Images by Richie Steffen

MAGICAL® RHAPSODY – progressive bloom changes, July - December

During the isolating days of the pandemic, I found myself drifting through the internet and stumbling across various garden and plant-related websites along with YouTube and social media videos. One particularly interesting video was a rambling tour of the Kamo Japanese Iris Garden Park in Kakegawa City, Japan. The panning video wandered through a very large, covered building filled with fabulous new and historic hydrangea cultivars. It was a delight to see various flower forms, including stunning double flowers and colors I have not seen in hydrangeas before. One of the most unique colors I saw were fully green mature blooms.

At this same time, Rick and I were considering creating a contemporary collection of hydrangea cultivars at our Kingston property to evaluate for Great Plant Picks, an educational plant program run by the Elisabeth C. Miller Botanical Garden. I never thought I would find any of the fantastic and unusual cultivars I saw on the videos, especially the intriguing green-flowered cultivars. Imagine my surprise while shopping at a DYI big box store seeing two different green-flowered hydrangea cultivars while doing a quick swing through the nursery department. These two shrubs fueled my passion for gathering the elusive and

LEFT TOP & BOTTOM:
PANDORA – starts green but ultimately white

BELOW & RIGHT:
MAGICAL® GREEN CLOUD – one of the best green-flowered hydrangeas

unusual green-flowering cultivars. Although these are not for everyone's garden, they have brought immense joy to me, and I always look forward to seeing the blooms as they emerge, peak and mature.

The first cultivars added to the collection were *Hydrangea macrophylla* 'Hortmarhaso' MAGICAL® RHAPSODY and *Hydrangea paniculata* 'HP217902' PANDORA. MAGICAL® RHAPSODY bigleaf hydrangea turned out to be a cultivar full of surprises while PANDORA panicle hydrangea, although

beautiful, lacked a long-lasting green color, and the mostly creamy white mature flowers would never be mistaken for green blooms. As the flower buds begin to open, PANDORA has great green coloring but no better than other panicle hydrangeas like 'Limelight' or the smaller compact cultivar *Hydrangea paniculata* 'Jane' LITTLE LIME®.

MAGICAL® RHAPSODY has become an irregularly shaped compact rounded shrub with reliable heavy flowering of small to medium-sized mophead (hortensia) flowers. The flowers go through several transformations during the growing season. The opening flower buds have dark green sterile florets that are tightly packed and remind me of a broccoli floret! The next set of developing florets are pea green with hints of pink and white in the center of each floret. As late summer approaches, the green sepals of the individual florets pick up flushes of red. In autumn, the once green flowers are strongly flushed red and burgundy. This autumn show can last well into November if freezing weather holds off. As an added dimension, this cultivar is remontant, meaning it will produce new flowers in late summer and early fall. During the second year of growing this cultivar, I was surprised to see the new growth lightly variegated in chartreuse and green. This unusual variegation also shows in the flowers early in the season. MAGICAL® RHAPSODY should reach about 3 to 4 feet tall and slightly wider in width in ten years.

The MAGICAL® series of hydrangeas is a branded, registered trademark group that is noted for compact growth and long-lasting blooms that are marked by color shifts in the bloom as it develops and matures. Many of the hydrangea

EVERLASTING® AMETHYST – flowers age to an unusual milky green

cultivars in this series are noted for the green coloring being part of the color shifts through the season. Just to make things even more complicated, the MAGICAL® series is also sometimes sold under the alternative branded trademark EVERLASTING™. All the hydrangeas in this series are *Hydrangea macrophylla*, the bigleaf hydrangea. I am growing five cultivars from this branded series, and I have been quite pleased with their performance.

The best green-flowered cultivar I grow is from the MAGICAL®/ EVERLASTING™ series, *Hydrangea macrophylla* 'Hortmagreclo' MAGICAL® GREEN CLOUD. Large mophead blooms are evenly distributed over the shrub and are a bright spring green. As the flowers open, each sepal is etched with white and pink veins. The effect is beautiful and elegant. The blooms have a graceful dome shape and are much more regular than those of MAGICAL® RHAPSODY. The aged flowers flush deep red and are darker in tone later in the autumn. This is a strong growing shrub that can likely reach 5 feet tall and wide in ten years. One characteristic I particularly like is the color of the foliage. It is a very dark green, almost a black green. This makes the flowers pop in the garden.

Hydrangea macrophylla 'Hokomathyst' EVERLASTING® AMETHYST is very different than MAGICAL® GREEN CLOUD or MAGICAL® RHAPSODY. The mophead flowers are large and full. The emerging bloom is a mixture of green and pink, but at full bloom, the green vanishes leaving a rich bright pink. As the flowers age, the pink fades and the entire flower changes to a pale milky green. These pale softly-colored flowers have a lovely luminescent quality in autumn. My shrub is pink due to planting it in a pot with neutral pH soil. If it was planted into my garden soil, its natural acidity would shift the colors from pink to blues and purples.

One of the first green and mixed-colored hydrangeas on the market was *Hydrangea macrophylla* 'Horwack' PISTACHIO™. Arriving at nurseries with much fanfare and marketing promotion, it was clear it needed to be trialed. The screaming hot pink and green flowers were jarring to the eye but could not be missed in the garden. Although I was initially repulsed by its irregular and floppy growth pattern combined with the outrageous vibrant blooms, I have slowly come to appreciate it. The floppy branches in youth have filled out creating an irregular mound reminding me of a cumulous cloud. After studying the bloom over several years,

PISTACHIO™ – extraordinary flower colors through the season

TOP: TILT-A-SWIRL™ – a striking new cultivar
MIDDLE: REVOLUTION – aged bloom in acidic soil
BOTTOM: REVOLUTION – aged bloom in alkaline soil

I now enjoy the wildly shifting colors and freely produced small mophead flowers over the season. There is never a time that there is not a range of flowers from just opening to fully mature. PISTACHIO™ is a compact grower and could make an interesting container specimen over time. I would encourage growing it in bright to open shade or full sun out of a hot location for the most prolific and colorful flowering.

Just recently, a new cultivar was released called *Hydrangea macrophylla* 'QUFU' TILT-A-SWIRL™. This combines bright pink and green on a compact shrub that appears to grow more evenly than PISTACHIO™. My plant is still quite young, and the next few years of growing will help tell if it is superior to PISTACHIO™. Both of these cultivars are currently being grown in pH balanced soil, so they lean toward pinks. I am curious what the colors will be when planted into my acidic garden soil. I would suspect purple tones would show up fairly quickly, but time will tell.

Last year, along with TILT-A-SWIRL™, I acquired *Hydrangea macrophylla* 'Hokomarevo' EVERLASTING™ REVOLUTION. This appears to be a very compact cultivar with an extremely compact and dense mophead flower. REVOLUTION is sometimes sold as REVOLUTION PINK or REVOLUTION BLUE, but both are the same cultivar, just grown in soils that are neutral to limey for pink flowers or given acid treatments for blue flowers. Interestingly, the color shifts are very different depending on the soil acidity. Since it is still quite new to my hydrangea collection, I am not certain on its ultimate height and width. It would not surprise me to find that this cultivar is around 3 feet tall in ten years.

Overall, my quest for green-flowered hydrangeas has been rewarding and interesting. I do not see these plants replacing the popular blue and pink cultivars that are more commonly found; but, for those who want something very different from the typical, they can fill the bill. Most of these cultivars are not easy to find and take some internet searching, researching and a little bit of luck to come across one of these plants. If you do and you like something a bit more unusual, be sure to snap it up during your nursery shopping!

Richie Steffen is Executive Director of the Elisabeth C. Miller Botanical Garden and member of NHS.

The Rare and Elusive Chinese Ironwood

Text and Images by Richie Steffen (unless otherwise noted)

Parrotia subaequalis

I have always liked the members of the witch-hazel family, botanically called Hamamelidaceae. The Miller Garden has many plants in this family including one of the largest examples of *Parrotia persica*, Persian ironwood in Washington State. When I first learned about Persian ironwood while taking ID classes at the University of Maryland, I fell in love with the tree for its remarkable disease and insect resistance, beautiful fall color, muscular sinewy branch structure and its tiny almost insignificant tufty, burgundy red flowers in late winter. I was also taught that this remarkable tree was the lone member of its genus.

Imagine my surprise when I heard there had been a new species recently introduced to Western horticulture, *Parrotia subaequalis*, the Chinese ironwood. Little noticed by botanists, this tree remained in obscurity to the West until 1992. A fruiting branch was collected in 1935 but remained unidentified until 1960. Professor Hung T. Chang of Sun Yat-sen University in Guangzhou, China noticed its similarity to *Hamamelis* and named the specimen *Hamamelis subaequalis*. No additional specimens were collected until 1988. Before this collection, it was feared that this unusual new species had become extinct.

In the fall of 1988, members of the Jiangsu Institute of Botany rediscovered a mature population of this elusive tree. Unfortunately, there were no flowers or fruit on these plants and the trees had to be monitored for three years before flowers were produced. Once botanists saw the flowers, it was clear it was not a witch-hazel. Witch-hazel flowers consist of four strap-like petals and are often fragrant to attract pollinators. These flowers lacked petals and instead had prominent bundles of long stamens with bright red anthers which is more characteristic of wind-pollinated plants. A name change was proposed in 1992 through a research paper by M. B. Deng, H. T. Wei and X. Q. Wang, and *Hamamelis subaequalis* was renamed *Shaniodendron subaequale.*

A few years later Dr. Riming Hao studied the flower structure and felt it was very similar to *Parrotia persica*, native to the mountains of Iran over 2,500 miles away. In 1996, material was sent for DNA analysis and his suspicions were verified. A new research paper written by Dr. Hao and H. T. Wei proposed the current name *Parrotia subaequalis* in 1998, and it remains as such today.

Likely one of the first introductions of this plant outside of China were to Japan through the famed Japanese plant collector Mikinori Ogisu in 1998. Mr. Ogisu then shared cuttings with plant collectors in England in 2001 and to the United States in 2004. Also, the Nanjing Botanical Garden sent cuttings to a Belgian nurseryman in 2000. From these and a few other introductions, this tree is now slowly becoming established in the nursery trade.

Of course, I had to have this plant! I had seen specimens in a few botanical gardens and private collections. So, I was on the hunt. I did find one young plant in a 2-gallon pot in 2019 and purchased two more small specimens in band pots in 2023. All are planted in the garden and are becoming established.

In their native habitat, they are quite rare and live an imperiled life. Only 14 populations are known amounting to approximately 100 mature trees. In the majority of these mature populations, only 10% of the trees produce seed. Clearly, this species lives on the edge of extinction. Fortunately, Chinese ironwood has proven itself easy to propagate from cuttings with early to mid-summer cuttings rooting readily.

Parrotia subaequalis
courtesy Paul Cappiello,
Yew Dell Botanical Garden

As with any new plant introduction, you have to ask yourself — is it garden worthy? Will anyone plant this? Fortunately, there is much to recommend this tree even though we still have a lot to learn about its growth and cultivation needs. Early plantings are seemingly easy to grow and adaptable. One of the first things I noticed was the spectacular autumn color. My first plant developed deep burgundy coloring to the leaves in early fall. The deep color held late into the season, then turned bright scarlet red before dropping. Fall coloring is best in full sun, but my oldest plant had developed excellent fall color in partial shade. This seems to be the exception rather than the rule. Apparently, there are some forms that hold their dead leaves on the branches into winter, but this was not a problem with this specimen. My two younger plants are too small and too new to provide a fair guess on their fall color. Perhaps, this year I will get a better idea of how the two smaller plants will fair.

Another feature is its small stature. Old trees in China barely reach 30 feet tall. I am expecting my plants to reach about 12 to 15 feet in ten years and slowly reach 20 to 25 feet tall in the next 20 to 30 years. These do seem to want to develop a broad form, so I am giving them enough room to grow as wide as they are tall, but some accounts suggest that they are not as wide as they are tall. They do seem to want to have multiple trunks, an asset when you consider that, as the tree matures, the dark blackish-brown bark peels and flakes revealing patches of greenish white bark below.

It is unlikely that the Chinese ironwood will be as drought tolerant as its cousin the Persian ironwood. The Chinese ironwood grows in forests that receive regular summer rainfall. My plants are located where they receive regular watering, but it would be worth experimenting to see how drought tolerant this new species will be in our gardens.

Chinese ironwood is well worth trying if you have space to experiment with a new small tree. If you are interested in learning more about this unusual introduction, I would encourage you to read the entry on *Parrotia subaequalis* on the website Trees and Shrubs Online: https://www.treesandshrubsonline.org/articles/parrotia/parrotia-subaequalis/ and the excellent article in the Arnold Arboretum's journal Arnoldia, Volume 66, Number 1, 2008 available online at: https://arboretum.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/2008-66-1-Arnoldia.pdf

Richie Steffen is Executive Director of the Elisabeth C. Miller Botanical Garden and member of NHS..

LITERARY NOTES
from the Miller Library

Brian Thompson

Seamus O'Brien gave a delightful talk to the NHS membership in May about the National Botanic Garden, Kilmacurragh of Ireland where he is head gardener. One of his favorite times of year is when the rhododendron collection is blooming, planted from seeds 175 years ago.

Joseph Dalton Hooker (1817-1911) of Britain was one of the prominent plant explorers of the 19th century. He collected those seeds during the nearly four years he spent in the tiny kingdom of Sikkim. Wedged between Nepal and Bhutan and butting up against the Himalayas, this landscape creates vast extremes in topography and climate and has an especially rich variety of plants in an area only slightly larger than King County. It is also at the crossroads of several distinct human cultures.

O'Brien is a modern-day plant explorer. Between 2012-2015, he led four tours of small groups to explore the rich flora of Sikkim, now a state within India. *In The Footsteps of Joseph Dalton Hooker* recounts his trips, skillfully weaved around a biography of Hooker's trip. "Unlike Hooker, our mission was not to collect, but to study and compare places he visited and to record how they had fared and appeared over 160 years later. In some ways Sikkim has changed little over the course of time."

The main goal of each man was finding plants, especially rhododendrons. Hooker discovered many and confirmed and accurately described several other species for science. O'Brien's group sought many of the same plants in the same locations where Hooker found them. Each was also interested in the people and the animals of Sikkim.

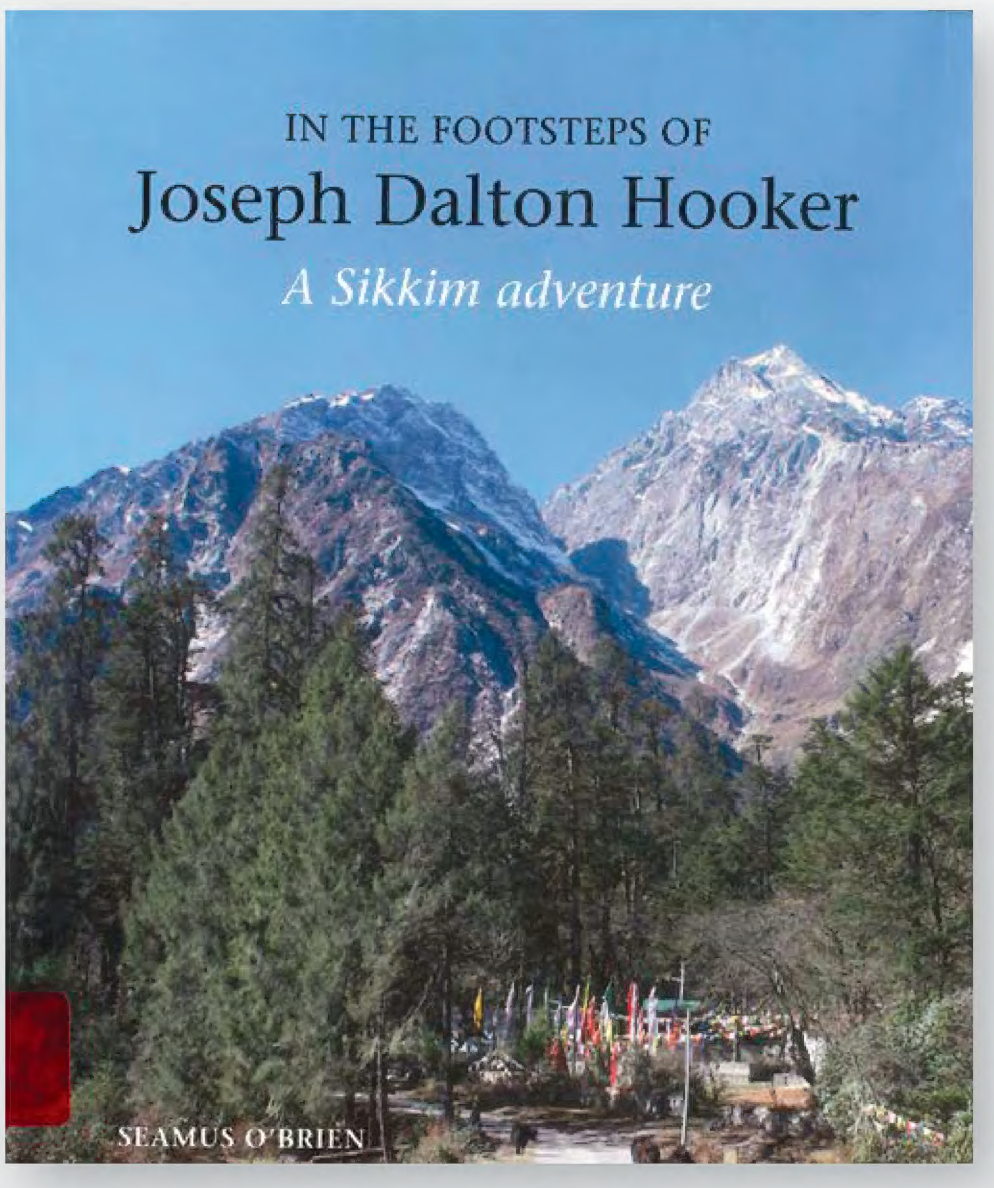
The result is a rich dialogue between two eras. Many of the physical and flora features of Hooker's day are still there. An example is "Hooker's Rock," a gigantic boulder in the Lachen valley, probably deposited by retreating glaciers. Hooker sketched it in great detail and included a circle of seated villagers and a couple of enormous yaks in the foreground. O'Brien includes photos of the same rock, and even captured a large, black yak posed in front!

Hooker also adopted a Tibetan mastiff named Kinchin, to be his companion and fierce protector. Sadly, Kinchin perished during a river crossing, but O'Brien was able to find similar — if somewhat more placid — dogs of the same lineage.

Seeds of many of the rhododendrons that Hooker sent home were planted at the estate that became Kilmacurragh as the conditions closely match the climate, soil, and rainfall of Sikkim. As O'Brien notes, "as a result of being surrounded by these veteran rhododendron species, I yearned to see them in their wild haunts."

This review was mostly excerpted from the Fall 2019 issue of "Washington Arboretum Park Bulletin."

Brian Thompson is the manager and curator of horticultural literature for the Elisabeth C. Miller Library.



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PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Dear NHS Members,

It looks like summer has come and gone, and fall is knocking on our doors. As Pacific Northwest residents, the beautiful summer days we always long for are no longer a certainty. While we are resilient and sometimes even enjoy cloudy summer days, we now have to face the reality of forest fires and smoke, which have taken some of the joy out of the season. I'm taking it one day at a time—grateful for every clear, smoke-free day.

I hope you've been enjoying the many garden tours organized by NHS and other groups. This year's Meet the Board Tour—featuring nine private gardens in South and West Seattle—was a great success. Thank you for all your support and positive feedback.

These garden visits inspire and teach us on many levels. It might be the overall garden design, a particular planting scheme, or even a single plant that captures our attention. Sometimes it's the style, the garden accessories, or the way living spaces are integrated into the landscape. Often, it's the conversations with the garden owners or hosts, who so generously share their experiences. We in the gardening community are deeply grateful to these private garden owners who open their spaces to us. Our fellow gardeners truly are some of our greatest teachers. Garden visits also become journeys and rituals with friends and family—shared experiences we look forward to and memories we cherish. I was recently reminded of this at the Hardy Plant Study Weekend, held this year in Portland. It was moving to see friends who have shared this experience—sometimes for decades.

At NHS, we are on the threshold of our 60th Anniversary. As many of you know, NHS was founded in 1966. The Board has begun planning how we will celebrate this extraordinary milestone, and we welcome input from our members and the larger community in shaping this celebration.

Most recently, I have been obsessed with an activity—poring over past issues of the NHS *Garden Notes*, starting from 1993, and vicariously experiencing the many activities and transitions the organization has undergone over the past four decades through this process. This is especially meaningful in light of the upcoming anniversary, but it is also an act of introspection, reflecting on how the organization has changed and evolved over the years.

One often gains different perspectives when viewing something as a snapshot in time versus as a progression over time. The evolution of *Garden Notes* reflects not only the growth of NHS but also broader technological and societal changes. For example, the early journals featured black-and-white hand-drawn illustrations, while today they showcase high-quality color photography. In earlier years, class registrations were handled by snipping out a form to mail in or by calling a phone number—so different from the sophisticated online registration systems we now take for granted. There was also excitement surrounding the announcement of the very first NHS website, followed by the gradual shift to digital communications as our primary way of sharing event information and announcements. Reading through old issues felt like paging through an NHS family album, seeing younger versions of so many familiar faces. It makes me proud to be part of an organization where people have remained connected across decades.

Like many organizations, NHS faces the ongoing challenge of preserving and nurturing the best parts of itself while also knowing when to grow, adapt, innovate, and prune back. As we approach this anniversary year, we will continue reflecting on our history while planning for a bright future in the years ahead.

Finally, our sincere apologies for the delay in *Garden Notes*—we are working diligently to bring it back on schedule.

Wishing you a wonderful fall . . .
Sashi Raghupathy, NHS President

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"My garden is an honest place. Every tree and every vine are incapable of concealment and tell after two or three months exactly what sort of treatment they have had."

— Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Journals*, (published 1909-1913)

Sedum spurium 'Ruby Mantle'
Image by Richie Steffen

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